

The Educated Sports Parent

Sport Specialization

Popular culture seems to be pushing the notion that in order to succeed at sports, kids need to be put into sports before they are even out of diapers, and then as soon as they get out of diapers they have to know what sport they want to commit themselves to for the rest of their lives so that they can practice enough to make sure they get some sort of athletic scholarship and do well enough to reach the professional ranks. I would like to remind you that 98% or more of athletes will never be elite athletes^{1, 2} and be the first one to tell you that popular culture has got it wrong. There is a time and a place for sports specialization, but it has no place in early childhood. I would like present information for you to help you figure out just when, and if, your child should specialize in a single sport.

First of all, you should know that the position of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)³ on specialization is the following, “Children involved in sports should be encouraged to participate in a variety of different activities and develop a wide range of skills” (p. 154). They also found that, “Those who participate in a variety of sports and specialize only after reaching the age of puberty tend to be more consistent performers, have fewer [injuries](#), and adhere to sports play longer than those who specialize early” (p. 156).

There are a number of very good reasons to explain why the AAP recommends children participate in a variety of sports as opposed to just one sport year round. First, constant participation in one sport can lead to [overuse injuries](#)^{3, 4}. When you participate in only one activity, you repeatedly stress the same joints, muscles, and bones over and over again. When the body does not have adequate time to heal from the stress put on it from practice or games, it begins to break down and get injured. Physicians now are seeing more and more overuse injuries and relating it to the recent trend in specialization (4). In addition, children are growing, and the natural process of growth leads them to be more susceptible to certain types of overuse injuries than adults (4, 5). On the other hand, when you participate in whichever sport happens to be in season, you may be getting important cross-training benefits while giving important rest to the muscles and joints used in the previous sport.

Second, specialization has been connected with athlete [burnout](#) (physical and mental exhaustion)¹ and with an athlete dropping out of sports all together because sports lose their fun. [Children say](#) they participate in sports for fun and enjoyment⁶, and when a child is constantly involved in the sport, added pressures come along with it that can take away the fun and leave a person with no desire to participate in the activity anymore⁷.

A third reason against specialization has to do with social aspects. Limiting a child to one sport can take away opportunities for interaction with peers and coaches involved in different sports⁸. When a child is focused solely on one sport and caught up in year round practice and clinics, it can take away from the time they have to just be a kid and hang out with friends. They may have to miss out on school or church

social events and time spent with friends.

Finally, it appears that many parents allow their children to specialize early because they see natural talent or they think it will give them a distinct advantage over their peers. You may be surprised to learn that it is very difficult to predict future success based on [early talent](#). In fact, only about 25% of the kids who are standouts in elementary school go on to be standouts later in their athletic careers^{1, 9}. Another thing to consider is that using so-called natural talent to determine future success can disadvantage those whose talent develops later¹. Many times we may be watching a youth team play a game, and one or two players seem to stand out. This may simply be because they have completed this early part of their development at a faster rate than the rest of the players and are therefore stronger or have more advanced motor skills. In fact, some athletes may be good in the early stages of a sport, but not possess the motor development potential to ever become an elite athlete¹⁰. You never know exactly how your child will grow and develop, so why limit the opportunities that they have to develop skills? Let's say they have an early natural talent when it comes to soccer, but their real talent lies in baseball. You see they have an early talent in soccer, so you never allow them to try baseball. Then their soccer talent levels off as the sport becomes more complex, and their baseball talent still remains hidden. Would it not be better to allow them to play a wide variety of sports and a wide variety of positions until you know where it is that they will do their best?

Along the same lines of natural talent is the issue of spending hours practicing one sport to gain an advantage and keep up with other players. While there may be some truth to this, Hecimovich¹¹ says that “scientific evidence does not support the belief that specific skills must be learned and perfected before the onset of puberty” (p. 35). Baker¹² reported much the same thing. Many examples from the professional world argue against the need for early specialization. Most people are already familiar with how Michael Jordan was cut from his tenth grade basketball team. Another basketball example is Tim Duncan, of the NBA champion San Antonio Spurs. Duncan was a swimmer early on and did not even begin to play basketball until he was in ninth grade. Yet look at how he has made up for lost time.

The bottom line is that children are growing and developing in the time before puberty. No one knows just what their specific sports strengths will be, and until that time, they should be encouraged to participate in any sport that interests them. Why invest time, energy and money in one sport if it can lead to injury, dropping out of sports participation and there is a very minute chance that a child will ever reach elite status? Research has shown that participation in multiple sports is more beneficial and allows children to have fun, develop skills, and enjoy the many other benefits of exercise and sports participation. Save specialization until at least high school, if not later.

Further Information on Other Sites:

[Intensive Training and Sports Specialization in Young Athletes](#)

- by the Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness (2000). *Pediatrics*, 106, 154-157.

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